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STATE FOR EAP/CM AND DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI SCUL KIRF CH

SUBJECT: YUNNAN HOUSE CHURCH CHRISTIANS LEFT ALONE BY GOVERNMENT WHEN
FOREIGNERS KEPT AT A DISTANCE

REF: A) CHENGDU 100 B) 06 CHENGDU 699

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CLASSIFIED BY: James Boughner, Consul General, United States
Consulate, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to two foreign missionaries and a Chinese Christian, the atmosphere for Yunnan house church Christians has improved in recent years and believers are able to worship with little government interference compared to other areas of China, if they are careful to maintain a distance from foreign religious groups. Our interlocutors noted the absence of any "killings" of Christians over the last decade, and a sharp drop in arrests and detentions of house church believers. While in the past Christian house church leaders were self-taught, today's leaders are benefiting from theology taught in "underground seminaries" and in distance learning courses. The official Three Selves Patriotic Movement (TSPM) is also very active and attracts over 1,000 young people every week to participate in their youth programs. Tightening of religious liberties has occurred in periods when "controversial" religious materials reached the public, but in general legally published Christian literature is widely available. North Korean refugees are passing through Yunnan en route to Thailand and an officially registered church several years ago offered assistance to a group of refugees who tragically drowned when their boat overturned on the Mekong. While the ability of Chinese citizens in Yunnan to practice their religious beliefs has improved, whether in the official TSPM Church or in unregistered house churches, foreign Christian NGO work has become more difficult in recent years. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In three separate May 15 meetings, Congenoff met with two foreign missionaries who have worked in Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Yunnan Province for over 15 years, and a 34-year-old Chinese Christian university professor. While overt foreign missionary activity is strictly suppressed in China, most missionaries operate through NGOs and are not openly religious. They usually quietly engage in missionary work separate from the NGO's other social and humanitarian activities. In private conversations which appeared to be unmonitored, the three interlocutors discussed the growth of the Christian house church movement in Yunnan as well as the government-sanctioned Three Selves Patriotic Movement (TSPM).

House Churches Worship With Little Interference

¶3. (C) The two foreign missionaries and Chinese Christian

described an "open" and "tolerant" atmosphere in which Yunnan Christians are able to worship with little government interference. Kunming has over 300 house churches, according to a foreign business consultant involved in the Christian NGO and missionary communities. (Note: the term "house church" implies that the church is not registered with the Chinese government. In some cases, however, house churches in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces have been permitted to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau or the TSPM (Ref. B). End Note) Ten of these churches have over 150 members, and many have well over 50 believers. When queried about how many new house churches were established in 2006, the consultant said that around 30 had been established in Kunming alone.

¶4. (C) In another meeting, a doctor working with a Christian NGO made a distinction between house churches in Yunnan and house churches in northeast China. He opined that house churches in northeast China were more frequently oppressed by government authorities because they "presented an anti-government voice." In contrast, Yunnan house churches have no "political agenda," and are allowed to exist with minimal interference, he said.

¶5. (C) The majority of Yunnan's house churches are unregistered, but many have tried to register, the consultant said in another meeting. He opined the government allowed them to exist unofficially because it wanted to maintain a measure of control in case it needed to clamp down or close them in a time of social instability. The contact cited the example of the unregistered Wenzhou Church, which has over 150 members. (Note: Members of the Christian community in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province are known for setting up churches throughout China to minister to Wenzhou people who have migrated. End Note) He speculated that the reason the government does not interfere with the church's activities may have something to do with the fact that many of its members are wealthy Wenzhou businesspeople with close connections to the government.

Religious Freedom in Yunnan Has "Improved Greatly"

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¶6. (C) A medical doctor whose Christian NGO works primarily in the health and education fields urged Congenoff to take a broad view of the progress in religious freedom in Yunnan over the past 15 years, which he opined had "improved greatly." He stated that in the early 1990s, house church pastors were sometimes beaten to death by Chinese authorities. To his knowledge, there have been no Christian leaders "killed" in Yunnan for the past eight to nine years.

¶7. (C) Another indicator of improvement is the decrease in the number and length of arrests and detention of believers. The doctor said that most detentions are only one day or less. There is an occasional detention of one to two months, and only in extremely rare cases is a Christian held for two to three years. He added that there were no Christians currently in jail that he knew of. When asked about a 2005 raid on a house church in Kunming in which several house church pastors were reportedly detained, the doctor acknowledged that this raid occurred in an unregistered house church in his housing complex. He said he believed the group attracted the attention of authorities only because two foreigners were participating in the service. Several pastors were detained, but were questioned and released quickly, according to the doctor. Two foreign missionary families were asked to leave the country.

¶8. (C) The doctor's NGO has been operating openly in Yunnan for 15 years and has had no major problems with Chinese authorities. He acknowledged that the atmosphere for foreign NGOs had become tenser, but that in spite of this, his organization's work on HIV/AIDS is welcomed by the authorities and by local Chinese.

Foreign Missionaries Maintain Distance from
House Church Worship Services

¶9. (C) Both foreign NGO contacts separately agreed that house churches run into problems with Chinese authorities when attention is drawn to them because of the presence of foreigners. One Christian NGO prohibits its members from leading any house church worship service. They are also encouraged not to even attend such services. The NGOs emphasize to their workers that the missionary's role should be to "disciple" and "minister to" house church leaders and believers in contexts outside of the formal worship services.

Theology Training for House Church Leaders

¶10. (C) Most house church founders and pastors are generally self-taught, according to one interlocutor. They are dynamic preachers who start small prayer or bible study groups that then rapidly grow in number. One of the important tasks of the foreign missionary community in Yunnan is to provide support for these church leaders, said the physician. Missionaries run "underground" seminaries to teach theological principles. Another method by which Christian NGOs train pastors is Theological Education by Extension (TEE), a type of correspondence course in which missionaries conduct training for short periods of time and pastors study on their own in the intermediate periods.

¶11. (C) In separate conversations, both foreign Christian representatives expressed optimism that house church leaders were slowly developing from being self-taught and relying on their own charisma to lead believers, to being educated and well-versed in Christian theology in order to guide believers. The doctor remarked that, in general, local government tolerance of Christian NGO activities and Chinese-only house church gatherings makes the missionaries' calling much easier. According to the consultant, in a couple of cases officials from the Public Security Bureau (PSB) have encouraged house church leaders to attend the official TSPM-run seminary so they can earn a certificate and be allowed to preach legally. Some TSPM pastors interact unofficially with house churches, according to the doctor. One TSPM pastor asked a house church leader for advice on organizing charitable projects in the education field. He commented that these types of examples show the "tolerance" Yunnan officials have for the house churches.

Active Community of Christians in Three Selves Church

¶12. (C) Turning to the official Christian church, one interlocutor described the active communities in the government-sanctioned TSMP churches in Kunming. He specifically referred to St. Anthony's and Holy Trinity which each have youth ministries that attract upwards of 1,000 young people every week. In another meeting, a 34-year-old Chinese University professor told Congenoff she "switched" to the TSPM after being involved with the house church movement for over ten years, and Campus Crusade for Christ for six years. She acknowledged that

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she developed Christian foundations through the guidance of foreign missionaries, but that she is now disillusioned by house church pastors and believers who have become too "rigid in their beliefs" and "dictatorial in their 'guidance' to believers." She prefers the atmosphere of the TSPM which is not so "structured." The professor added that house church Christians tended to view Catholicism as a cult similar to the Falun Gong, a view she disagreed with. She added that these types of "extreme" ideas develop under the influence of fundamentalist and evangelical foreign missionaries.

Sensitive Periods Relate to Inflammatory Material

¶13. (C) When queried about his opinion on the 2003 book "Jesus in Beijing," which presents a history of the development of Christianity in China, one foreign NGO contact expressed his unhappiness with what he referred to as the "deceptive tactics" used by the author to gather information from the Christian community in Yunnan and his subsequent inclusion of individual names in the book. While the foreign missionaries named in the

book experienced some mild questioning from authorities, many of the Chinese Christians were detained or arrested.

¶14. (C) The contact explained that in 2003 there was also controversy over the release of the Chinese movie "The Cross," which described the history of Christianity in China, and also contained a 20-minute political anti-government "diatribe." The movie was banned soon after its release. Both the book and the movie were presented to the National People's Congress, and Chinese authorities initiated a period of general tightening of religious freedom during that time, the doctor said.

Christian Literature Plentiful

¶15. (C) The doctor from the Christian NGO recounted that in April one of the NGO's Chinese staff members was detained while he was distributing legal Chinese-published Bibles. He was questioned for a day and then asked to leave the prefecture. The NGO gave him a new job in a different prefecture.

¶16. (C) The contact said the "old days" of distributing illegal smuggled Bibles published overseas are basically over. There is plentiful Christian literature available at bookstores run by the TSPM as well as by private house church believers. Amity Press, which used to publish Christian materials in Hong Kong, is now affiliated with the TSPM and publishes a large number of Christian materials on the mainland. There is really no need for people to take the risks of distributing illegal Bibles anymore, he concluded.

Assistance to North Korean Refugees

¶17. (C) When queried about NGO assistance to North Korean refugees passing through the province en route to Thailand through Laos or Burma, the business consultant and doctor both separately affirmed they were aware of refugees passing through, but did not have any idea about the numbers. The consultant recounted a situation from two to three years ago when his NGO worked with an officially sanctioned church in Xishuangbanna that tried to assist between six and twelve North Korean refugees. (Note: In minority areas, registered churches are not part of the TSPM, but are managed by the Ethnic and Minority Affairs Bureau. End Note) The church arranged and paid for a boat to transport the refugees down the Mekong River to Thailand. Tragically, the boat capsized and the refugees all drowned. In an earlier conversation, the doctor implied the NGO stayed away from assisting North Koreans because of the politically sensitive nature of the issue and their desire to "keep a low profile."

Vibrant Expatriate Christian Community in Kunming

¶18. (SBU) There are three large expatriate Christian groups in Kunming, our contacts said. Two groups have 300 members, and another group of South Koreans has 150 members. None of the groups are officially registered, but all meet regularly with no problems.

Comment

¶19. (C) Our foreign missionary contacts impressed upon us that even while foreign Christian NGO work has become more sensitive and difficult in recent years, the ability of Chinese citizens to practice their religious beliefs, whether in the official TSPM Church or in unregistered house churches has steadily

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improved in Yunnan. We have observed similar government openness toward Muslim communities in southern Yunnan when the believers are not openly involved with foreigners (Ref. A). While our contacts did not go so far as to claim a symbiotic

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relationship between the Chinese Government and house churches, they repeatedly used the word "tolerant" to describe local officials in Yunnan. Those officials are "well aware" of the

existence of hundreds of house churches and thousands of Christian believers, yet keep their distance in the absence of obvious foreign involvement in formal worship services.

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